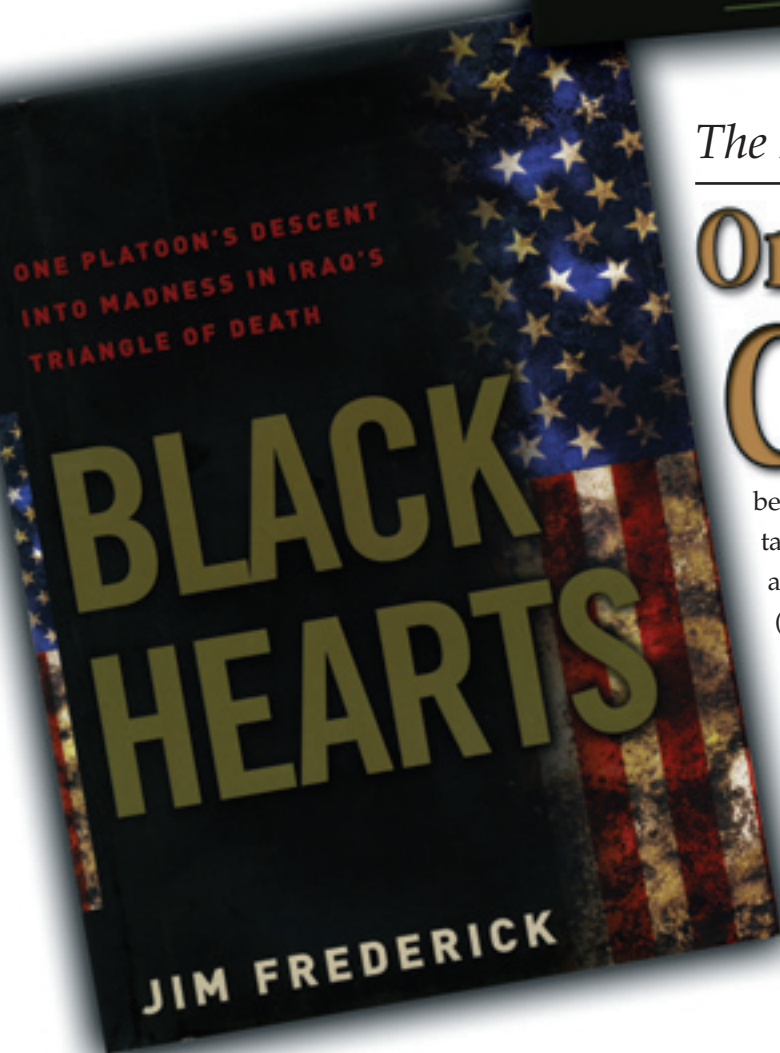
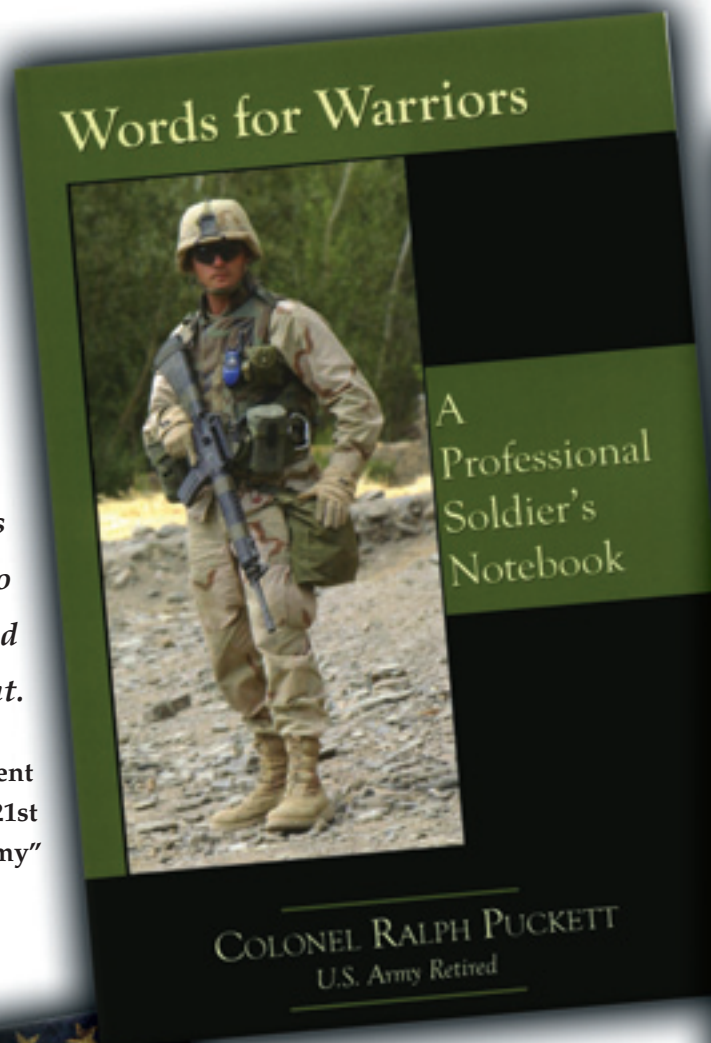


*[We must]
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—“Leader Development
Strategy for a 21st
Century Army”



The Pro-Reading Challenge

One Achievable Step

Chip Heath and Dan Heath, in their book *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*, share what we call the one-percent milk story. A team of researchers working in West Virginia, where childhood obesity and diabetes are significant issues, decided to experiment. Instead of taking a traditional, holistic approach that included education and exhortation about eating healthy and being physically fit (an approach that had previously achieved little, if any, effect), they decided to focus 100 percent of their effort on one behavioral change. They asked parents to buy one-percent (or skim) milk instead of whole milk. They executed a campaign plan to communicate this single challenge to the people. In the process, they appealed to parents' emotions by laying out five strips of the fattiest bacon next to one 8-ounce glass of whole milk, both of which have the

Anderson
(Ret.)

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Execution

The Black Army Officer

My First Infantry Platoon
Korea - 1953
1st U.S. Cavalry Div.

Calder from
Prairie View A&M College
Summer Camp, 1943
Camp Hood, Texas

Company G
RUC, Summer Camp
Camp Hood, Texas 1943

Calder from
Prairie View
A&M College
Summer Camp 1943

Clyde McQueen

SEBASTIAN JUNGER

WAR

By LTC(P) Tony Burgess
and
MAJ Corey James

for Army Leader Development

same amount of saturated fat. "All we are asking you to do is to change one behavior" was the campaign's mantra. Before this, being healthy required too many changes that, for most people, led to "giving up." The combination of the emotional image of the bacon with the simplicity and absolute clarity of the change (just do one thing—buy one-percent milk) made an impact: Low-fat milk purchases jumped from 18 percent to 41 percent immediately, and then settled at 35 percent.

In November 2009, the Army published the "Leader Development Strategy for a 21st Century Army." The authors write, "It is well known that over the past several years we have become an Army out of balance. It is less well known but increasingly evident that we are out of balance in developing our leaders." The paper

goes on to lay out eight leader-development imperatives that "will guide policy and actions in order to develop leaders with the required qualities and enduring leader characteristics." Two of the leader-development imperatives, things that we believe are absolutely critical to the success of our profession, are:

■ *Encourage an equal commitment by the institution, by leaders, and by individual members of the profession to life-long learning and development.*

■ *Produce leaders who are mentors and who are committed to developing their subordinates. It is an enduring principle of Army leadership that we mentor, coach, and counsel subordinates. ... Leaders must create the conditions for development.*

The mandate to develop our subordinate leaders, like

the mandate to be healthier, can feel overwhelming and vague, especially given our operational tempo (OPTEMPO) and the complex, decentralized nature of our operations. Although we love the principles it represents, the Army's leader-development strategy left us saying, "I don't even know where to begin." Just how do we create the conditions for development?

As one-percent milk was a galvanizing focus to move people forward in the health challenge, what is our galvanizing focus to move us forward in the leader-development challenge? There is no single right answer here, just as one-percent milk was not the only option for those researchers in West Virginia. The point is to pick something and to *take action*. In so doing, you can create momentum and leverage the positive second-order effects that emerge as a result. In this article, we want to offer up one idea that many leaders are enthusiastically adopting—the Pro-Reading Challenge (PRC). At its essence, the Pro-Reading Challenge is to read and talk about a book with your team of leaders.

The MilSpace Pro-Reading Challenge

We are part of a team that started the Company-Command (CC) and PlatoonLeader (PL) professional forums. The forums can be accessed via <http://CC.army.mil> and <http://PL.army.mil>. (Members must be currently commissioned officers or, in the PL forum, cadets.) The forums are catalysts for thousands of us to connect with each other in conversation about leading and loving soldiers. We believe, even more strongly now after a decade of experience, that leaders who engage in such a professional forum will become more effective and will develop more effective units. They will learn to be better leaders.

Pro-Reading was originally a topic in the CC forum. In 2008, with an Army Studies Program research grant sponsored by the Army Chief Information Officer/G-6, we reorganized the forums into a professional development system we named MilSpace and included Pro-Reading as a separate area that is accessible to all CC and PL members. In Pro-Reading, we talk about books and articles that we are reading, we recommend and vote on books that have made a difference for us (members, see <http://Read2Lead.army.mil>), and we take the Pro-Reading Challenge.

The basic concept of the Pro-Reading Challenge is for teams of leaders to read and talk about developmental books with each other. Via the MilSpace system, we invite company commanders to take the challenge, and we give them the resources to do it. Those who respond to the challenge select a book, and we send them free copies to read

with their lieutenants. We then establish a space in the online forum for them to talk about the book.

Over the last six months, we've shipped more than 260 books. But the design of the Pro-Reading Challenge allows it to reach farther than the realms of the leaders who visibly participate. We affix a sticker to the inside front cover of the books, communicating that the book belongs to the profession and for the officer to sign it and pass it on to another leader once it has been read, creating a chain of reading with a positive, "pay-it-forward" ripple effect. Because part of the discussion happens in the online space, thousands of MilSpace members gain visibility of what would otherwise be completely hidden to the profession. Each participating commander contributes to the development of his or her team of leaders and also contributes to the larger community of leaders who have access to the conversation and the insights that emerge. Moreover, the positive example of the commanders who take the PRC is amplified and raises the bar when it comes to leader development and what is possible even in a high-OPTEMPO environment. MilSpace members find themselves thinking, "If these company commanders can do leader development like this, so can I."

When we launch a commander's PRC in the online forum, we begin by posting a question for the commander: "To kick off your PRC, I'll throw out a two-part question for you. Why did you choose this book, and what do you hope your leaders get out of reading it?" Stephen Magennis, commander of Company C, 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry Regiment, Fort Richardson, Alaska, selected the book *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* by Steve Coll. Magennis is focused on preparing his leaders for another deployment to Afghanistan. Here is his kickoff response.

I read this book prior to deploying to Afghanistan and again while I was there. The historical aspects it provided on Afghanistan and the different ethnic sects helped me understand the background of many of the people I interacted with daily. It hit home for me one day while I was in a large meeting room with an Afghan corps commander, many brigade and battalion commanders, and their U.S. counterparts. There was a large mural of Ahmed Shah Massood, the Tajik military hero from the war with the USSR. Being that the majority of higher level officers were from the north [and] many were Tajik, I understand why next to a mural of Hamid Karzai there was another of Massood, who was killed on September 10, 2001.

It also helped me understand how al Qaeda was able to gain a foothold in the country. I learned that Osama bin Laden was conducting stability and support operations back during the Russian occupation by building hospitals in Khost and Paktika Provinces, which I could relate to because I was in both.

Lastly, many of the main players we hear about these days were around during the Muj days; Haqqani and Hekmayter

LTC(P) Tony Burgess and MAJ Corey James, faculty members at the U.S. Military Academy, are part of the team that created the MilSpace professional development system—a grassroots learning system that connects platoon leaders and company commanders from across the Army with each other in an ongoing conversation about leading soldiers and growing combat-effective teams. Currently commissioned officers (and cadets) can seek membership via <http://PL.army.mil> and <http://CC.army.mil>.

now lead the most dangerous Taliban networks, the Haqqani Network and Hezb-i Islami Gulbuddin.

This is a good book for company-level leaders to read prior to deployment, and it's worth revisiting during deployment. I haven't read many books on the history of Afghanistan, but I would guess this is about as good a history book as we need. Platoon leaders need to understand what's going on around them with the social fabric of society and the cultural aspects of the Afghan military to be effective. One day, when [a leader is] partnered with an Afghan company and he sees Tajiks and Pash-tuns fighting each other, he'll have a better understanding that it's not because one of them got a little more chow at the mess hall; it's probably due to a long-standing grudge.

Another commander, Heath Brown (Company C, 1st Battalion, 167th Regiment, Alabama Army National Guard), selected *Words for Warriors* by COL Ralph Puckett. Here is his kickoff response.

Thank you, indeed, for this program—and the opportunity. I decided to run with COL Puckett's book for one big reason: alignment of training philosophy and values.

Our company has pretty much done a facelift of senior leaders. With the minimal train-up time until we have a National Training Center rotation and, ultimately, deployment, I don't have the luxury of developing leaders the way I'd like to. This book, along with my emphasis on specific training goals, really drives home a lot of the thought processes, behind-the-scene actions and development for my leaders.

I spoke with some of my personal mentors and some of the mentors from this site about "philosophy-type" versus "how-to-type" books as a first book to go with. There are reasons to do either type first. COL Puckett really incorporates both in his writing. It seemed that this was just the best choice.

I really want my leaders to get passionate, absolutely 100 percent in love with their soldiers. It will be then that they will sacrifice their own energies to best prepare our soldiers for the fight. It is obvious that COL Puckett is passionate about his soldiers; he is what "right" looks like, and worth attempting to emulate.

If you are like us, reading through these responses makes you want to read the books. Now picture the impact on the lieutenants. Picture the effect on the other MilSpace members who will read these notes.

Participating leaders typically spend several weeks discussing the book, combining both online and face-to-face discussions. Most have found it effective to ask a series of questions in the online forum, perhaps one a week, which

everyone has to reply to, and then to meet periodically in person to talk about it. The online conversation serves as a primer for the in-person conversation, which is richer and more engaging as a result. Additional techniques that commanders have employed include rotating the role of conversation facilitator so that each platoon leader has the opportunity to lead discussions and closing the activity by having each participant summarize key "takeaways" from the book. We have found that "less is more"; company commanders who keep the program focused on a few key

questions over a month or two are more successful than those who drag it out too long and end up falling prey to other urgent priorities that inevitably crop up in a unit.

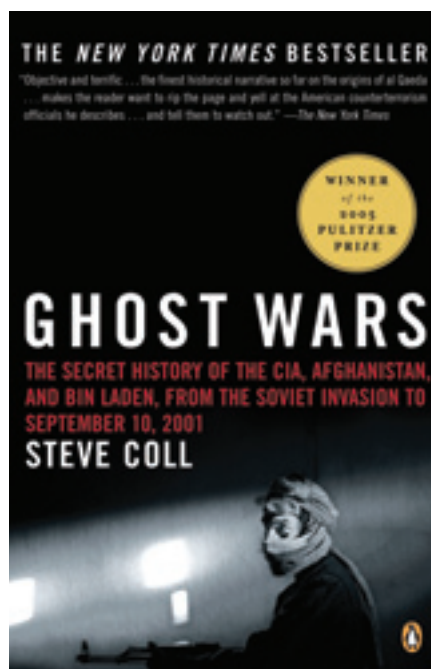
Stephen Magennis, the commander who selected *Ghost Wars*, was in the middle of his Pro-Reading Challenge experience as we wrote this article. His technique was to focus every couple weeks on a different section of the book. He identifies one or two questions that he specifically wants his officers to respond to in the online space. For example:

On page five, the author writes, "They [the Taliban] carried fresh weapons and ample ammunition. Mysteriously, they repaired and flew former Soviet fighter aircraft, despite only rudimentary military experience among their leaders."

Question #1: After reading the first 100 pages, how do you think they were able to do this? **Question #2:** Oil is responsible for the spread of Islam. Agree or disagree?

The online discussion is focused and serves to get the juices flowing. By honing in on one or two questions, Magennis makes sure that the points he wants to emphasize are covered. He also includes a Microsoft Word document with additional notes and questions that he wants to bring up in the face-to-face conversation later that week. Second Lieutenant David Nance, the company fire support officer, told us:

The method of breaking down the book *Ghost Wars* into smaller pieces is extremely helpful. After every section we [meet] and discuss key points that are predetermined by our commander. This helps by giving me the chance to let all the information sink in and formulate my own opinions about what I have read. Being able to talk about the assigned section with my peers helps me look at things from another angle and either reinforces my own thoughts on the assignment or makes me rethink and take another look. As I am reading, I look for key points and am able to let the concepts of what the author is trying to convey reach me. This also gives everyone an idea about what we will discuss so that our [meetings] are stimulating and we all have informed opinions.



Second Lieutenant Benjamin Niehoff, 2nd Platoon Leader, reinforces 2LT Nance's point and emphasizes a critical element of the PRC—connecting the learning to what you are actually doing. He said:

The breakdown of the reading into short assignments and knowing the questions ahead of time helps me focus my reading. I think it also makes our officer professional development sessions more effective. I especially like maximizing the time we spend discussing the relevance of the material to current operations.

Second Lieutenant Niehoff's last point is critical: Commanders are selecting books that are relevant and that reinforce what they are trying to accomplish in the unit. It is not just reading for reading's sake; rather, it is targeted reading that will directly affect leader understanding and effectiveness. In the case of this example, the leaders of Company C will deploy to Afghanistan better prepared than they otherwise would have been. Interestingly, the PRC is having a ripple effect in the company because soldiers are taking note that their leaders are reading and discussing the book. Magennis writes, "We just conducted a 10-day training rotation to Fort Greely, Alaska. Soldiers rotating through the company command post discovered the XO's copy of the book, so now a bunch of my junior enlisted guys are reading and enjoying it."

A growing number of company commanders are including the Pro-Reading Challenge as a key part of their leader-development strategy. The following is a snapshot of the current PRCs happening on MilSpace: Joe Pimentel (B/3-15 IN) and his leaders, participating from Al Anbar Province, Iraq, are talking about David Kilcullen's *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*. Ari Martyn (B/1-68 AR) and his leaders, also in Iraq, are talking about Jim Frederick's *Black Hearts: One Platoon's Descent into Madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death*. Marcus Perez (92nd MP Company) and his leaders are talking about James R. McDonough's *Platoon Leader: A Memoir of Command in Combat*. The 92nd MP Company recently redeployed to Germany from Afghanistan, where the platoons were extremely decentralized, not unlike the situation in which McDonough found himself in Vietnam. Perez is using the PRC as a catalyst for his combat-experienced lieutenants to reflect on leading in Afghanistan and to get his new lieutenants to think about the experiences they will have when they deploy. Lendrick James (G/1-9 FA) has read and talked about three books with his leaders while deployed to Iraq: *The Art of War*, *The Black Army Officer* and

Military Logistics Made Easy: Concept, Theory, and Execution. Erin Kennedy (617th EN Company) and her leaders in Iraq picked Chris Kolenda's *Leadership: The Warrior's Art*. Christopher (C.J.) Douglas (1st Battalion, 24th Marines) and his leaders are talking about Sebastian Junger's book *War*. Douglas seeds the monthly discussion with a simple topic such as "friction" or "human factors" and then proceeds to tie together a key, relevant portion of a Marine Corps doctrinal publication with a related section of the book. Scott Shaw (2-5 CAV) is kicking off a discussion of *Black Hearts* at Fort Hood, Texas.

Just as one-percent milk was a galvanizing force to move people forward in the West Virginia health challenge, the Pro-Reading Challenge is one way for Army leaders to take action when it comes to leader development and lifelong learning, helping leaders to overcome the feeling that leader development is overwhelming, or just "pie-in-the-sky stuff." It is one specific action leaders can take and point to as evidence that they are, in fact, "committed to developing their subordinates." In the process, leaders create momentum and foster a culture of learning. Once you taste genuine leader development, you want more of it. Perhaps most importantly for the health of our profession, lieutenants who take the PRC are much more likely to incorporate professional reading into their leader-development plans when they are in command. In this way, you pay it forward, creating that third-generation-leadership (3GL) effect: "Success [from the 3GL perspective] is not developing great leaders.

Rather, success is developing great leaders who themselves have a personal vision to develop great leaders" ("CompanyCommand," ARMY Magazine, June 2007).

The Pro-Reading Challenge is not the only way to take action, nor is it sufficient by itself. Developmental counseling, role modeling on a day-to-day basis, seizing teachable moments, holding subordinates accountable—and just plain being with them—are all part of how we lead and develop leaders in our great profession. In the future, we plan to introduce additional "one-percent milk equivalents"—one of which is the MilSpace Leader Challenge, an interactive, video-based vignette that places the player in a dilemma that a leader actually faced and challenges the player to share what he or she would do in the situation. ★

The authors would like to thank Steve Delvaux, Mike Runey, Scott Shaw, Kelly Jones, Niel Smith and John Vigna, each of whom has played key leadership roles in the Pro-Reading Challenge part of MilSpace. They are exceptional people who have a passion for professional reading and developing soldiers.

